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INFO RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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RUEKJCS/JCS WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 4162
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4484
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 3059
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 002503

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PACOM FOR FPA HUSO
NSC FOR MORROW

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TAGS: PREL MARR PGOV TH

SUBJECT: THAILAND: GEN SONTHI VOWS TO KEEP TRANSITION
TIMETABLE

REF: BANGKOK 756

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Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (a and d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Council for National Security (CNS) head General Sonthi Boonyaratglin assured the Ambassador that, despite frustrations with PM Surayud Chulanont's indecisiveness, he would not oust the Prime Minister, that neither Sonthi nor any other member of the CNS would become Prime Minister under the interim government, and that elections would take place before the end of the year. Sonthi also told the Ambassador that the CNS would not impose any emergency measures limiting civil liberties in Bangkok to preempt public demonstrations but reserved the right to implement measures to protect public safety if violence erupted in the capital. Sonthi claimed not to have decided who would replace him as Commander in Chief of the Royal Thai Army (RTA), but strongly indicated it would not be Assistant RTA CINC and frequent firebrand General Saprang Kalayanamtr. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In a May 2 dinner at the Residence, GEN Sonthi, accompanied by RTA Assistant CINC GEN Anupong Paojinda, Deputy Chief of Personal Staff GEN Atikom Tanlert, Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence LTG Tienwit Saipong, Director of Intelligence MG Sirichai Distakul, and Personal Staff Officer Senior COL Nothapol Boonngam shared views on the current political situation.

"I WILL NOT OUST SURAYUD"

¶3. (C) In a lengthy pull-aside before dinner, the Ambassador told Sonthi that Washington continued to monitor the political situation and was concerned about press speculation that Sonthi might oust Surayud and name himself as Prime Minister. Such a move, the Ambassador said, would be "untenable." The Ambassador also cautioned Sonthi against staging any type of "re-coup," delaying elections or implementing emergency measures in Bangkok to curb civil liberties.

¶4. (C) Echoing his comments in February (reftel), Sonthi expressed his continued frustration with Surayud's indecisive

nature. He noted that Surayud's inability to come down on recalcitrant subordinates had caused less damage years ago when Surayud was RTA CINC because the Army's hierarchical structure tended to ensure that his orders were obeyed. In the political realm, however, Cabinet members have been able frequently to ignore edicts from the Prime Minister without consequences. Sonthi acknowledged that there had been talk of staging a follow on coup to replace Surayud. However, he was quick to add, it was obvious that doing so would only further alienate the international community and cause the CNS to lose the domestic support of those who view the September 19 coup as an evil necessary to rid the country of former PM Thaksin Shinawatra. "What would be the point of my becoming Prime Minister," Sonthi asked rhetorically, "if doing so undermined everything we worked for in September?" Sonthi gave every indication that he expects Surayud to remain as Prime Minister until elections are held despite the Prime Minister's shortcomings. "If we were to replace Surayud there is no one up to the job we could name in his place," he added.

TIMETABLES WILL BE MET, WE WILL NOT PREEMPTIVELY SUSPEND CIVIL LIBERTIES

¶5. (C) Sonthi also told the Ambassador that he is committed to holding elections before the end of the year. Anupong, who is also a member of the CNS, also assured us in a side bar conversation that elections would be held before the end of the year. Sonthi told the Ambassador that the CNS would not implement any emergency measures in Bangkok curbing civil liberties in order to preempt any public demonstrations but reserved the right to take public safety measures in the capital if demonstrations turned violent.

WHO WILL BE THE NEW ARMY CINC?

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¶6. (C) Under Thai law, Sonthi must retire on October 1. In response to the Ambassador's query of who will replace him as RTA CINC, Sonthi did not tip his hand. However, he did suggest that he disagreed with earlier practices of naming the new CINC too early since doing so tended frequently to cause that officer to preen about and lose focus on his ongoing assignment. It is no secret that RTA Assistant CINC GEN Saprang Kalayananamtr hopes to be named as CINC and has been jockeying openly for the position for some time. Sonthi was dismissive of Saprang's chances, however, leaving the strong impression that he thinks Saprang would be a poor choice for the position. Sonthi suggested that Saprang's rough edges and tendency to act like a loose cannon tend to make him seem like a country mouse visiting the big city.

¶7. (C) In an aside at dinner, LTG Tienwit privately expressed his personal opinion that either Assistant CINC Anupong or RTA Chief of Staff GEN Montree Sangkrasap would be the next CINC. Tienwit discounted rumors that MOD Permanent Secretary GEN Winai Phattiyakul would be Army CINC since

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Winai lacks a power base within the RTA.

¶8. (C) Sonthi did not say what he plans to do after stepping down from the RTA, but did not rule out an eventual role in politics. The Ambassador, noting America's history of military officers in political life, stressed the importance of those persons entering politics through the normal political process rather than through extra-legal means.

HOW TO MAKE THE TRAINS RUN ON TIME

¶9. (C) Sonthi told the Ambassador that, in an attempt to force Cabinet members to implement their instructions, he had begun sitting in on Cabinet meetings. Sonthi suggested that doing so was time-consuming but removed any doubt in the

Ministers' minds that the CNS endorsed the instructions of the Prime Minister. Sonthi expressed frustration at the government having had to appoint deputy ministers to oversee the work of Cabinet Ministers but indicated he would not support a major cabinet reshuffle given how disruptive a reshuffle would be and the short amount of time remaining before elections.

THE CONSTITUTION

¶10. (C) Sonthi and Anupong both expressed confidence that the electorate will ultimately endorse a new constitution. Sonthi said that a number of controversial clauses had been inserted in the initial draft in order to gauge public opinion. Those clauses deemed most divisive, he explained, would be modified before the constitution is submitted to the voters.

THE SOUTH

¶11. (C) Sonthi and Anupong both attributed the increased level of violence in southern Thailand to the minority of radical insurgents there who hope to foment Buddhist-Muslim violence to stave off any chance of reconciliation with the Government. Anupong said such measures should be expected from hard-line radicals who fear the majority of the population will be willing to work with the government to resolve their grievances. Anupong noted the Thai Government's continued desire to deal with the insurgency as a domestic matter but expressed appreciation for U.S. technical assistance and training to improve overall skills within the RTA.

RESTORING THE MIL-MIL RELATIONSHIP AFTER ELECTIONS

¶12. (C) Several of the RTA officers present expressed their hope that once elections are held at the end of the year both governments can move quickly to restore mil-mil links. One went so far to ask whether IMET could be restored by the end of December if fair elections were held earlier in that month.

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